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IDENTIFYING WORK PREFERENCES AMONG INDIVIDUALS WITH SEVERE MULTIPLE DISABILITIES PRIOR TO BEGINNING SUPPORTED WORK

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We evaluated a prework assessment for predicting work-task preferences among workers with severe multiple disabilities prior to beginning supported work. The assessment involved comparing worker selections from pairs of work tasks drawn from their future job duties. Results of workers' choices once they began their jobs in a publishing company indicated that the assessment predicted tasks that the workers preferred to work on during their job routines. Results are discussed regarding other possible means of determining preferred types of supported work.

DESCRIPTORS: supported work, severe multiple disabilities, vocational preference assessment

A major development in vocational services for people with developmental disabilities since the early 1980s has been supported employment. A central premise of supported employment is that attention should be directed to the vocational preferences of individuals who obtain supported jobs (West & Parent, 1992). However, little research attention has been directed to accomplishing this goal (Test, 1994), especially among individuals with severe disabilities (Winking, O'Reilly, & Moon, 1993). There is a particular need for research on methods for assessing preferences for work tasks with which a potential worker with severe disabilities has no experience and for ensuring that results of preference assessments conducted prior to beginning a job generalize to the work site once the worker begins the job (Winking et al., 1993). The purpose of this investigation was to evaluate a method of assessing work-task preferences among people with severe multiple disabilities prior to beginning a supported job that would represent their work preferences after paid employment was initiated.

METHOD

Participants and Settings

Three participants were selected for the following reasons. First, each person had severe multiple disabilities. Second, these individuals were the next persons within their case management agency scheduled to begin supported jobs. Third, support personnel indicated that each individual would enjoy

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working in an integrated community setting. The latter factor was particularly relevant for 1 participant who was beyond the age at which many persons retire.

Each participant had severe physical impairment that prohibited ambulation. Standardized assessments indicated that each participant had severe mental retardation and profound deficits in adaptive behavior. Mr. West was 30 years old and communicated in one- or two-word utterances, although his vocabulary was limited. He used an electric wheelchair for mobility and received nutritional intake through a gastrostomy tube. Mr. Freeman was 49 years old and communicated in short sentences, although articulation problems interfered seriously with his communication effectiveness. He was unable to propel his wheelchair. Ms. Edwards was 73 years old and attempted to communicate vocally, although her speech was extremely difficult to understand. Ms. Edwards used an electric wheelchair for mobility. All participants required physical assistance to complete basic care routines.

The primary setting was the participants' job site, which was located in a suite of offices occupied by a small publishing company and a realty company. Although they were employed by the publishing company, the participants' work space was in an area of the lobby frequented by patrons of both businesses. The secondary setting was a classroom at the participants' day-treatment site, which the participants generally attended during the day when not at work.

Procedure

Prework preference assessment. The available jobs at the publishing company involved preparation of books and advertising information for mailing and consisted of five specific tasks: stamping addresses on envelopes, folding advertising flyers, applying labels to flyers, stuffing books into envelopes, and affixing postage to envelopes. Preferences for the different work tasks were assessed using procedures developed by Mithaug and Hanawalt (1978). However, three specific components were included in the preference assessment to address (a) whether preferences assessed before beginning a job would generalize to the job situation and (b) difficulties in assessing preferences for job tasks with which individuals had no familiarity. First, the work materials used during the assessment were identical to the materials to be used on the job (i.e., the same envelopes, books, etc.). Second, staff members who would later function as job coaches for each worker conducted the assessments. Third, to provide familiarity with the work tasks that would represent the supported job, each participant spent time working on each task during the preference assessment in the same manner as would be expected on the job.

Preference assessments were conducted individually. The necessary materials to complete two of the five identified tasks were placed in the participant's view, and the assessor asked the participant to choose one task. A choice of a task was defined as pointing to or touching one of the task materials. An observer recorded the participant's choice while the assessor provided the materials to work on the chosen task for 3 min. During the 3 min, the assessor provided the participant with only as much assistance as needed to correctly complete the work. In addition, the participant was observed momentarily at the end of each minute to determine the occurrence of work engagement, defined as manipulating materials in a manner to complete the work task.

After working with the chosen task for 3 min, the process was repeated by pairing the task that had been previously chosen with one of the three remaining tasks. After a specific task was presented once with each of the other tasks, a new pair of tasks was selected randomly and presented. This process

continued until all 10 combinations of tasks had been presented, at which point one assessment session was complete. Four assessment sessions were conducted with Mr. West, three with Mr. Freeman, and four with Ms. Edwards. Reliability checks were conducted during at least 20% of the assessment sessions for each participant. There were no disagreements.

Next, a percentage score was calculated for each work task (as a measure of preference) by dividing the number of times it was chosen by the number of times it was presented. The most and least preferred tasks for each participant were as follows: labeling and stuffing or folding for Mr. West (chosen 63% and 44%, respectively); folding and labeling or postage for Mr. Freeman (chosen 75% and 33%, respectively); and folding and labeling or postage for Ms. Edwards (chosen 63% and 44%, respectively). Then, the most preferred task and one least preferred task that had been identified during the prework preference assessment were assessed during the on-the-job comparison. To allow different types of work to be completed at the request of the employing publishing company, different tasks that were least preferred were assessed across the 3 participants (i.e., stuffing for Mr. West, labeling for Mr. Freeman, postage for Ms. Edwards).

Comparison of prework preference assessment to preferences expressed on the job. The target behavior during the on-the-job preference assessment was choice of work tasks that occurred during daily work duties. Reliability observations were conducted during 21% of all observations. Observers never disagreed on the specific task that was chosen by each worker.

Participants were scheduled to work for approximately 2 hr during each assigned work day. After an initial start-up period, the remaining work time was divided into three 20-min work periods separated by brief breaks. During each work period, participants were exposed to one of three conditions. The three conditions involved (a) assigning a participant to work on his or her least preferred task based on the prework preference assessment, (b) assigning a participant to work on his or her most preferred task, and (c) allowing a participant to choose to work on either his or her least or most preferred task. Exposing the participants to these conditions served the practical purpose of increasing the likelihood that all of the work expected to be completed by the employing publishing company was actually completed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The on-the-job cumulative choices for each participant's most and least preferred work tasks based on the prework preference assessment are presented in Figure 1. When provided with a choice of work tasks as part of the daily job routine, each participant chose the task that the prework assessment had indicated was most preferred more frequently than the least preferred task. Each participant chose the most preferred task on at least 75% of the choice opportunities.

These results suggest that by performing preference assessments in the manner described prior to job placement, jobs may be identified that involve work tasks that match the work preferences of individuals with severe multiple disabilities. Consequently, workers would be more likely to enjoy their daily work relative to the more traditional process of obtaining jobs that have no known relation to their work preferences (Winking et al., 1993).

The on-the-job assessment of preferences encompassed a relatively short period of time, involving 8 to 11 weeks. It is not known whether the prework preference assessment results would predict on-the-job preferences for a more extended time period. Nevertheless, initial time spent on the job

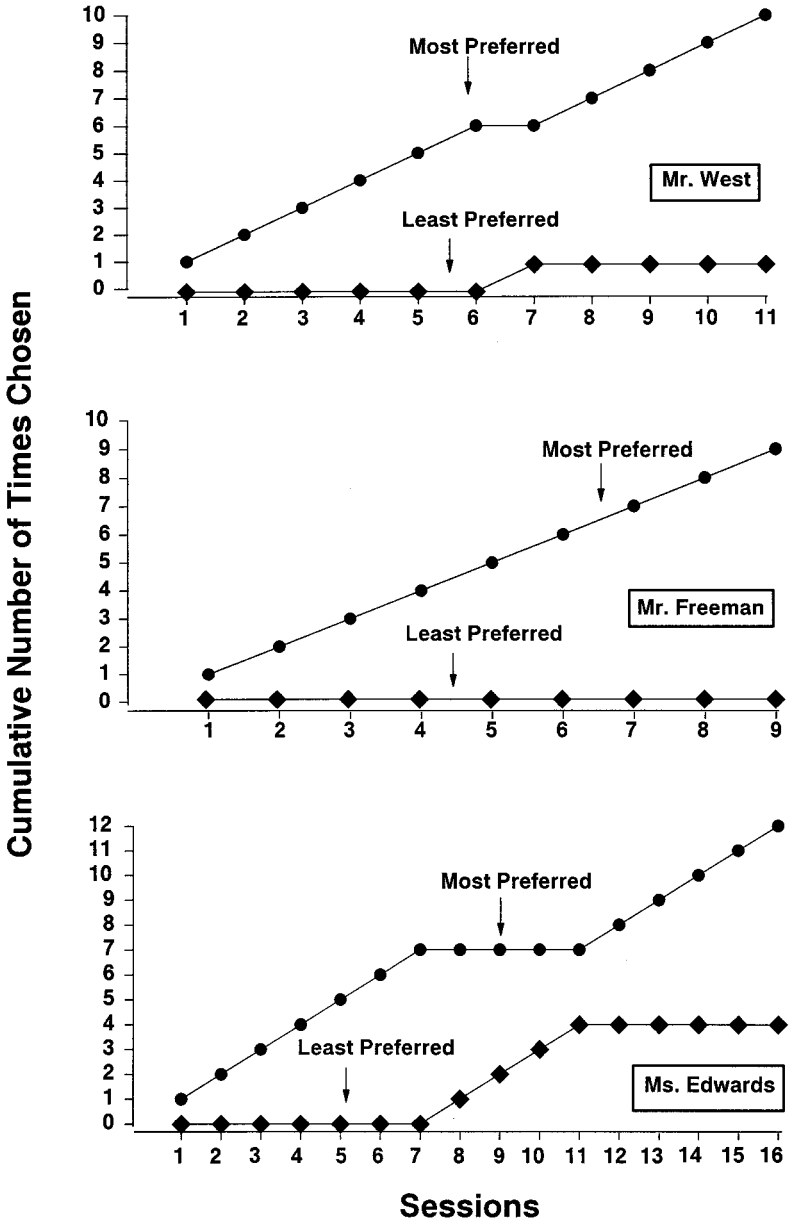

Figure 1. Cumulative number of times each worker chose his or her previously assessed most preferred and least preferred work tasks across work sessions.

represents an important period in the overall success of supported work (Jauss, Wacker, Berg, Flynn, & Hurd, 1994). Another qualification is that preferences were assessed and predicted only with regard to the workers' most and least preferred work tasks.

A potential advantage of the prework preference assessment is that by including work on the actual job tasks for short periods of time, workers can gain familiarity with the tasks involved. Relatedly, working on the actual tasks affords job coaches the opportunity to evaluate a worker's ability to perform a job and determine the types of

support likely to be required in the regular work setting. Additional research is needed on how to assess an individual's preference for an entire supported job relative to other jobs in addition to specific work tasks in each job, as well as other variables (e.g., social interactions with co-workers) that may affect worker satisfaction.

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